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THE ROLE OF MILITARY MYTH IN SOCIETY

by

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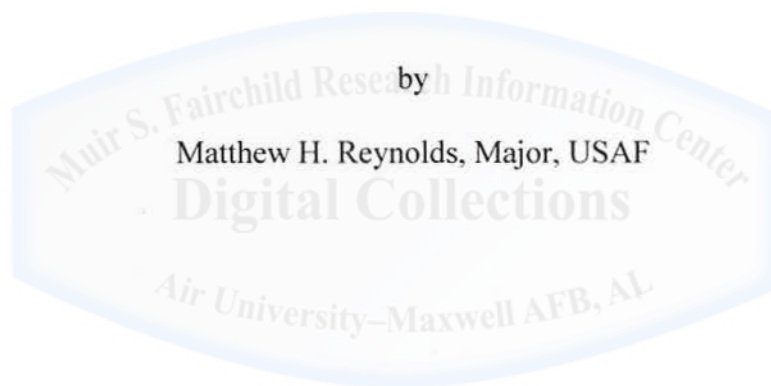
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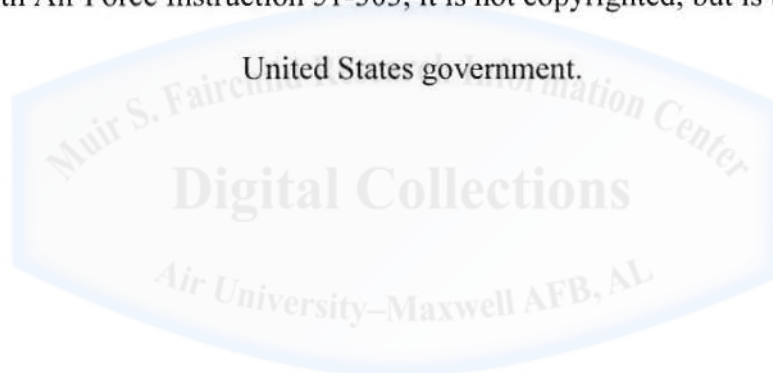
Abstract

This paper discusses the role of military myth in society, specifically modern American society. It argues that military myth, in most cases, fosters the belief that the nation's cause is worthy and should be supported by the members of the society. The paper reviews elements of military myth throughout history, including war monuments dedicated to WWI dead, the image of the aviator in WWI, the Chinese Long March, the *levée en masse* in the French Revolution, and the popular image of German military members after WWII. It goes on to utilize several recent American works to highlight the role of the military myth. Works examined include the novels *Red Alert, The Hunters, Cassada, Catch-22*, and *The Ace*. It also discusses movies including *Strategic Air Command, Gathering of Eagles, Red Tails*, and *The Tuskegee Airmen*. Overall, the paper explains that the military myth attempts to justify why members of a society should willingly participate in the society's defense.

Mythmaking is vital to the health of a society. One of the most important types of myth, due to its central role in the affairs of the modern nation-state, is military myth -- those myths that a society attaches to its military members. If a society is to flourish, it must at times be ready to engage in warfare. As warfare – especially modern warfare – tends to be a dangerous and deadly event, the society needs a way of encouraging its members to participate when needed. Likewise, if societal participation in a given war is determined by members of the society to have been a mistake, those members need a way to inform the society that what happened must not be repeated. Military mythmaking therefore can have a dual nature. It can be employed to valorize combatants from past struggles, in order to inform the society that those who fought did not do so in vain and to prepare societal members for possible future sacrifices. It can also be used to highlight the tragedies and sorrows of struggle, to alert the members of the society that similar things should not happen again. Overall, positive military myth is intended to foster in the members of a society the belief that its military men are worthy of praise, and that their cause is a worthy cause – that is, society is intended to support the men and their cause. Negative military myth is intended, for any of several reasons, to have the opposite effect – to convince society that certain causes are wrong or that those who serve them are similarly incorrect.

These military myths, positive or negative, tend to have certain similar elements. Unsurprisingly, most will feature a hero, or heroes – the person or group the story is about. In some cases these will be individual, that is, a certain hero will be remembered long after death. In other cases, the group is important – an entire unit may be remembered as a group. The society needs individuals to recognize themselves in the myth, whether as lone heroes engaged in combat or as part of larger group that sacrifices on behalf of the nation. Note that this does not mean the heroes will be perfect; some stories may make mention of the less than salubrious

characteristics of its protagonists. The important concept is that the heroes, while they may be flawed, still act in a way that is of overall benefit to the society. The myth will center around the cause that the dead served, because members of the society need a reason to enshrine in memory their war dead. The myth often advocates that the sacrifices were not made in vain, because members of the society need to understand that future sacrifices may need to be made, and they must be ready should the call come again. Finally, the myth will attempt to demonstrate that the hero or group is emblematic of the larger society. In his struggle and potential sacrifice, the hero represents all members of the society, either to encourage them to join in his struggle or to reassure them that he fights on their behalf, and is thus worthy of honor.

In our course we have examined several movies and books, each of which features several of these elements. In many cases, these elements are observed partially via tropes, or themes, that recur again and again in different portrayals of the myth. When one considers tropes in the last several decades, the word is often conflated with cliché. In other words, for example, military movies might depict their characters saluting each other at every possible opportunity, even though actual military members may not behave in this fashion. This action, in and of itself, is a relatively simple shorthand that has become a trope by virtue of its common use. Therefore, as it is common to many military movies, it is almost seen as a cliché. However, "saluting constantly" is not in and of itself an element of a military myth. It is a trope of military movies, to be sure, but tropes and elements of military myth as mentioned above are not always identical. They are often contiguous, but the important concept is that tropes support the greater myth. In other words, for example, the saluting trope reinforces and supports one of the elements of military myth mentioned above – the concept of the hero. Military myth will be examined at greater length via review of several movies and works of literature utilized in the course. Tropes

qua tropes are not necessarily *prima facie* evidence of a myth at work; they contribute to and reinforce the greater concept of the myth as it is exemplified in these movies and books.

It is important to first understand the background of military myth. Any society which is large enough to identify itself as a group is large enough to desire its own perpetuation. To that end, a society must define rules and values. These rules and values serve to give the members of the group guidance – they offer a roadmap that, if followed, will hopefully allow the society to continue and flourish. One of the first duties of a group is to ensure that the members of the group can go about their daily business in safety and security; basic rule-sets regarding rules and values allow societal members to have confidence that their essential liberties (whatever they may be in that society) will not be threatened. These rules and values often change over time, as the society encounters new problems or new modes of thought, and works to integrate these concepts into their view of the world.

Some of these rules deal with interpersonal contact, for example, a society might proclaim that it is wrong to kill other members of that society. A society might proclaim that it is wrong to deprive fellow members of their property, or it might forbid expression of views it sees as inimical to survival. These rules might be viewed as baseline ideas – that is, in order for a member of the society to work for a better future, he must be confident that (for example) a fellow member will not be allowed to attack him out of hand.

Another set of rules promulgated by a given group as it works to define itself will be those governing the use of force on behalf of the group. Any group will eventually be threatened by others, whether from within or without, and in order to ensure survival must define when force can be used in pursuit of societal goals. For example, police forces may be empowered to use force, even deadly force, against members of the society who are violating agreed-upon social

codes. A similar set of rules are those a society applies to the use of force against outsiders, such as other societies. One type of society with which the modern world is familiar is the nation-state, and when a nation-state utilizes force on the behalf of is citizens, it tends to do so mainly by means of a uniformed military service. As warfare is a dangerous business, a society needs to convince its members that participation in armed conflict has value, whether for personal glory, societal survival, or any of a number of other reasons. Over time, through repetition and reinforcement, these myths are 'operationalized' for members of the society as myths. The myths serve to implant the concept of the rule for the society.

Military myths have existed for as long as societies themselves, and serve as vehicles to perpetuate the righteousness of the society's wars. The opposite can also be true; myths can arise to remind members of society of the dangers of certain courses of behavior or flaws in a given system. In some cases, for example, military myths arise in reaction to conflicts that are not perceived as righteous, and those myths have the opposite intent – to inform societal members that similar conflicts should not be tolerated. A survey of historical military myth, American and otherwise, will furnish examples of these ideas. Many of the elements described above – the hero, his companions, the enemy, the nature of the struggle, and the special or unique weapons the hero uses – will make an appearance in these stories.

An example of military myth as societal guideline can be observed in the aftermath of the First World War. In this conflict, the unexpected brutality of newly invented technologies such as the machine gun and the tank contributed to an unheard-of death total in the tens of millions. When the war ended, societies all over the world sought appropriate ways to memorialize their dead. "The overseas monuments […] have one thing in common: they all incorporate traditional motifs, such as classical columns, patriotic symbols, and figurative statues."[1] Mark Snell goes

on to quote historian Jay Winter's opinion that the reason for classical (as opposed to modern) symbolism was because "Traditional modes of seeing the war, while at times less profound [than modern modes] provided a way of remembering which enabled the bereaved to live with the losses, and perhaps to leave them behind."[2] We can therefore see that society wished to commemorate these deaths as worthwhile; the military myth in this case is almost literal, as even the form of monuments chosen to remember the dead harken back to mythological (that is, classical) times. The honored dead of a given conflict are symbolically the equal of those heroes commemorated in ancient epics.

Another element of military myth present in the aftermath of the First World War was the nature of the burial arrangements given to the dead. Officers and enlisted men received identical headstones, and the care accorded to their remains did not differ based on their rank.[3] As Piehler states, "Equality of commemoration represented an effort […] to foster a vision of American nationalism that stressed the voluntary and willing sacrifice of the individual to the nation as a whole."[4] Thus, it can be clearly seen that American society wished to remind its members that the American efforts in WWI had been worthy and contributed to national survival, and were a source of pride for the society. These burials and the treatment afforded the war dead were intended to inform the society that the deaths had not been in vain; the deaths were in the service of a greater cause – the protection and safety of the society.

Military myths can also be observed in the treatment afforded to aircraft pilots during WWI. The aircraft was a new form of technology in this conflict, and the age itself was one that focused on the exploits of heroes, scientists, adventurers, and the like. The pilot was a clear choice for a society bent on making myths. Dominick Pisano, in "Legend, Memory, and the Great War in the Air," discusses fellow historian George Mosse's comments on WWI: "The

image makers, Mosse contends, constructed a myth about the war that gave it a religious form or feeling, made saints of the war dead and shrines of their graves, and provided a heritage that would be carried forward in wars to come." As mentioned, society needed to impart the image of the valiant, worthy sacrifice, in order to ensure that future conflicts might be supported by the society in a similar fashion. Pisano says, "The myth served to make acceptable what was intrinsically unacceptable, console the population, and assure the nation that the war had not been fought in vain." By and large, these myths focused around the aviator, who "…emerged from World War I as a genuine hero – the embodiment of traditional values, beliefs, and ideas. The nineteenth-century notion of honor and chivalry in battle had been mortally wounded in the trenches […] but the aviator […] was seen as a breed apart."[5] This perception of the aviator as special would reverberate down the decades. What is especially relevant is the depiction of the aviator as embodiment of society's values; he represents what is best and most noble in the society. The society of the time was intended to see the airman as an exemplar of societal valor and pride, and to understand that the airman fought a dangerous war on their behalf.

These myths can be seen as well in other countries' accounts of battle; they are not confined to American stories nor are they only the province of the aviator. Harrison Salisbury memorializes the Chinese soldiers who participated in the Long March by saying, "But already [the March] has made indelible marks on the face of China, great changes in Chinese consciousness. It has bequeathed to the nation extraordinary unity and spirit unseen for many centuries. […] For the present, we can view it as China does—an unparalleled act of collective courage, dedication, and hope."[6] From this account we can see similar mythic elements to those mentioned above. The Long March is seen as collective – representing the virtues and values of Chinese society, both at the time and in the present day. We can observe the belief that the Long

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March was undertaken by a relative few on behalf of the whole, and that its many sacrifices were not made in vain, but in the service of a greater Chinese destiny.

An older example of this myth can be found in the events of the *levée en masse*. This began during the French Revolution in 1793, wherein the entire populace of France was placed at the service of the army – literally, the populace was essentially conscripted, but societal mythmaking allowed the levée to succeed by framing it as a patriotic duty.[7] Moran states, "The goal was to create, within the mass of French citizens, a moral and social dynamic that bears some comparison […] to the aristocratic conception of honor."[8] Military and societal mythmaking ensured that the levée, which could have been seen as a negative or undesired effort, was instead preserved as an example of a positive action on behalf of national survival: "The levée en masse might have been remembered simply as an emergency wartime measure […] Instead, it has done down in history as a spontaneous, voluntary expression of the French people's ideals and enthusiasm, to which a revolutionary regime had merely given practical effect."[9] The military myth that the levée was a natural outgrowth of inherent societal patriotism was intended both to inculcate in society the concept that the levée fought worthy battles on their behalf, and to prepare society for a potentially similar requirement in the future.

Another example of mythmaking in service of a society comes from the post-war saga of German Army soldiers, specifically in this case those who served on the Eastern Front. In the decades following the end of WWII, there was a concerted effort made by former Wehrmacht soldiers, and assisted by many others, to paint them as valiant, courageous servants of the German state. They were painted as, and painted themselves as, pure military men who either had no idea of the horrors of the Nazi regime or were not in any way sympathetic to those aims.[10] This image stands in stark contrast to the depiction of German actions immediately after the war,

which depicted them in a far harsher light and celebrated the Russian army as not only American allies in WWII, but victims of German barbarities. The change was spearheaded by former German soldiers, anxious to cooperate with the victorious Americans and to secure their assistance in rebuilding their country. As Smelser and Davies state, "The German officers faced a difficult task in the mid and late 1940s. How could they detach their war records from the Nazi regime […] and persuade the Allies of their value in rebuilding Germany? Preexisting ties between German and American military officers certainly helped predispose the U.S. military toward the German position."[11] The authors go on to explain that the advent of the Cold War "…blinded the Americans to crimes committed by the German military…"[12] Over time, this myth was accepted as reality: "From diplomats and military officers, the myth of the "clean Wermacht" made its way into a broader American public and soon became an enduring story in American popular culture."[13] It is not difficult to imagine why this change in the American mindset took place. Former German officers and enlisted men, whether Nazi sympathizers or truly apolitical soldiers, had a vested interest in a myth that would paint them as simply former enemy soldiers – free of the taint of Nazi actions, war crimes, and the general horrors associated with that terrible regime. American political leadership, desirous of a staunch European ally as the Cold War unfolded, would far prefer to remember and interact with German military personnel as fellow professionals, rather than despised former Nazis. Also, as mentioned above, one element of myth is its power as prescriptive agent; a myth can allow a society to endure by memorializing select qualities of its predecessors. Modern German military members and civilians have taken every possible step to distance themselves from the Nazi regime; it makes sense that they would wish to focus on the military virtues of their soldiers' history rather than completely ignoring the war years entirely. The German people – and other affiliated nations –

need to remember German soldiers as professional military members whose military actions were undertaken in service to the German society, even if at the behest of Hitler and his ilk. This is similar to those who study or memorialize the American Civil War. Those who study that conflict acknowledge the role of slavery in the conflict (to greater or lesser degrees) but also wish to study the military actions of those soldiers who were involved. While neither nation pretends the unthinkable actions of its predecessor regimes occurred, they have constructed myths that allow them to focus on the military characteristics of the soldiers involved without being forced to expunge their names entirely from history.

Military myths are present in recent American depictions of its soldiers as well. Many of these stories, presented both as books and movies, have been examined during our course. They feature various elements of myth as described above – a hero, or group, the cause they serve, the nature of their sacrifices, and the fact that its protagonists represent the society at large. The first such case is Peter Bryant's *Red Alert.* The book depicts a rogue base commander who sets into motion Wing Attack Plan R – an atomic attack on the Soviet Union – by his Wing's B-52s. After an attack on his base carried out by Army troops in an effort to locate the recall codes (which is unsuccessful, as the base commander has committed suicide) the Wing Exec manages to guess the correct codes by reviewing the commander's notepad.[14] All of the Wing's bombers are recalled, with one exception, because that particular bomber's CRM-114 secure radio was damaged by Soviet fighter attack during the ingress to the target.[15] The bomber proceeds toward its target and even manages, finally, to release its weapon; however, the pilot has been fatally wounded and the aircraft crashes soon after he releases the bomb. The bomb does not work perfectly due to damage sustained by the bomber, and while it explodes, it does so short of the expected yield (and in an unoccupied area) thus preventing the destruction of the target city.[16]

The importance of *Red Alert* lies in how it finds a way to include elements of myth. The crew of the *Alabama Angel* is depicted heroically, intended to represent all the crewmen of SAC during this time. It's important to note that even though they are attempting to drop nuclear weapons and presumably kill millions of people, they are not painted as evil men. They are shown as men motivated by duty and faithful to their orders, not as puppets or fools (even though some of their backstory includes less-than-perfect elements, such as womanizing.) In fact, even after the bomb fails to detonate, they are still lauded: "At [the base of the nuclear explosion], the crew of *Alabama Angel* slept their last sleep. They had failed, yet in their failure they had achieved victory. They could sleep content."[17] Even though they intended to kill millions, and even though they failed in their task, they are explicitly painted as good men and even as victors, in a sense. Similarly, the President is depicted as a hero even though he expects to have to agree to the destruction of an American city by Soviet weapons. When he is asked whether he wishes to launch American fighters to shoot down the Soviet bombers, he replies, "No, Steele, it can't be done. I've given my word. Now I have to stand by it…"[18] Later, the Russian Ambassador is impressed by his resolve: "He had been immensely impressed with the firm grasp the President had on the reins of government […] The Russian Ambassador had noted, too, the stubborn determination the President had shown when he refused pointblank to allow the Marshal to choose an American city."[19] Even though the President is apparently going to allow the nuclear death of millions of Americans, he is shown as a man of his word, as a hero who saves as many lives as possible and does what must be done without hesitation. The greatness of *Red Alert* lies in how it uses these elements of myth – the heroes and the causes they serve – to make a point to the reader that the cause itself, the defense of America, is difficult and worth caring about.

James Salter's *The Hunters* also uses several elements of myth. The story revolves around Cleve Connell, a Korean fighter pilot who wants to become an ace. He is depicted throughout the book as a man in single-minded pursuit of this goal, although he ultimately falls short by achieving only one aerial victory. However, during the combat that eventually yields his first victory, he thinks to himself: "Cleve had never felt so fine as when they finally headed back through the quiet sky. This was the real joy of it all. He understood at last."[20] Later, the book describes that, "For a time, everything was good. [...] His name had some meaning. Moving among the others or alone, he was again and again conscious of victory."[21] This concept of 'having a name' recurs at the end of the book, when Cleve tells Colonel Imil that Billy Hunter, who did not survive a crash landing after running out of fuel, was the one who shot down the notorious enemy MiG pilot known as "Casey Jones." In fact, it was Cleve who shot down Casey Jones, but Cleve awards the victory to Billy, thinking, "Billy Hunter would have his day as a hero, and in memory be never less of a man than he was on his last flight. Cleve could give him that, at least – a name of his own."

The mythic element here is twofold. Cleve wishes to be a hero – to be someone whose name is worth remembering. He wants to be part of a proud group – the group of fighter aces. More than anything else, he wants to be remembered, to have his name on the wall of honor with the unit's other top pilots. The story is about Cleve and how he wishes to become an element of the military myth through his heroism and through recognition as an ace. In the end, Cleve instead sacrifices personal glory to benefit a fellow pilot. The reader is intended to understand that Billy Hunter's sacrifice was not made in vain – that he will be remembered as a good pilot who killed a dangerous enemy. Cleve's behavior demonstrates that he is a worthy hero; he gives up credit

on behalf of another man, which makes him worthy to be remembered and mythologized for American society as a good man.

James Salter's novel *Cassada* is similar, in that it deals with fighter pilots and heroism, although not in the crucible of the Korean War. The book deals with a new pilot named Cassada, his adventures with the squadron, and his eventual death as he attempts to land his jet in horrible weather conditions. At one point, Salter makes Cassada's role as a mythic figure almost literal by saying, "Tentatively, as if it might be ignored, one of the farmboys waved and Cassada, a god, arm resting on the cockpit railing, raised it and waved back. He was at last all he had dreamed of."[22] Cassada is an object of respect, perhaps even adoration, for the local boys. It is not impossible to imagine a proportion of the society as a whole admiring, if not wanting to emulate, jet fighter pilots in a very similar fashion at airshows today. The image of the heroic pilot that began in WWI is alive and well in the image of Cassada taxiing past those young boys. At the very end of the book, a pilot named Isbell is returning home. His thoughts demonstrate an element of military myth. He thinks, "It was too soon for him to reappear, that would come years after when all of it was sacred and he had slipped in with the other romantic figures [...] It is only in *their* lives they die. In yours they live to the end."[23] He is explaining to the reader that the military condition is one of impermanence. Pilots, and squadrons, come and go, and each individual only remembers their particular times. The very last sentences of the book state, "Parts of it he could hardly remember. The rest was still clear. But it was all back, falling behind. There was no use trying to save anything. After a while you begin to understand that. in the end you got on a train and went along the river."[24] He is explaining the nature of military myth. The heroes and the groups in which they served are generally not remembered by name. A service member takes part in certain events, and forms certain bonds. These bonds, while in

memory everlasting, are transitory in nature. Pilots come and go, like Isbell or Cassada. However, the book tells us, the cause goes on.

Salter's two novels are quite similar in this aspect. Both tell stories of impermanent men in units that may or may not remember them when they are gone. However, these works are important because they exemplify military myth: in each, men give their lives, sometimes literally, to the cause they serve. Their search for meaning reflects our own; they are like us. The cause they serve is important even though they themselves will not be long remembered as individuals. Both books tell us that their heroes are part of a greater cause, and demonstrate that even though their actions are brief in nature, the cause itself will live on even after they are gone.

It is certainly not the case that all works which showcase the various elements of the military myth are positive in nature. That is, many military stories exist which paint a negative picture of the military; they invert the military myth to point out what their authors consider problems in the military. One such novel is *Catch-22*; the book hardly needs introduction due to its undying fame in American culture. The story centers around Yossarian, a bombardier who wishes to return to the United States. He is prevented from doing so by a cadre of supervisors, who continually raise the minimum number of missions required for stateside transfer for a variety of reasons, most of which center around making themselves look good to their superiors. Heller states, "As Colonel Korn often remarked, the war was crawling with group commanders who were merely doing their duty, and it required just some sort of dramatic gesture like making his group fly more combat missions than any other bomber group to spotlight his unique qualities of leadership."[25] In this book, the cause for which the men are fighting is made to seem ridiculous by virtue of the absurd nature of the military bureaucracy and of the war itself. Perhaps no single scene is more aggressively absurd than Milo's method of making a profit on eggs – although

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hard to summarize, Milo somehow makes money by losing money on eggs that he continually buys and resells, sometimes to himself or his agents. "I distribute my plum tomatoes […] so that Colonel Cathcart and Colonel Korn can buy them up from me under their assumed names at four cents apiece and sell them back to me the next day for the syndicate at five cents apiece. They make a profit of one cent apiece, I make a profit of three and a half cents apiece, and everybody comes out ahead."[26] There is no way this could actually work; the point is that it is absurd and demonstrates the larger absurdity of the war. Heller is calling the entire military myth into question – the seeming heroes are certainly not heroes in the conventional sense, the groups for which they work are dysfunctional (to say the least,) the cause is suspect at best (at one point, Milo pays the Germans to attack his own airfield on behalf of the syndicate), all sacrifices are made in vain, indeed the entire structure of the war is meaningless. Even the book itself is literally out of order – it is not told in chronological order, adding to the confusion.

However, the fact that Heller inverts the military myth is not in and of itself meaningless. He is trying to make a point about war, and about God. When he describes the death of Snowden, the gunner whose fatality in combat starts Yossarian on his journey to escape, he says, "That was the secret Snowden had spilled out to him on the mission to Avignon – they were out to get him; and Snowden had spilled it all over the back of the plane."[27] This is Heller's central point: war is absurd, and faceless men killing each other from great heights confers no nobility on anyone. He is using the military myth to make a point about the horror of war. Later, when Yossarian impersonates a dead soldier when that soldier's parents come to visit, the father says, "I want you to tell Him something for me. Tell Him it ain't right for people to die when they're young. I mean it. […] I don't think He knows it ain't right, because He's supposed to be good and it's been going on for a long, long time."[28] Heller's point is that, if God exists, a rational person

would ask why He permits wars to occur. The fact that He does not only adds to the absurdity and insanity of war. Heller understands the military myth, because he stands every element of it on its head in service of his greater point that war is absurd and meaningless. The elements of myth serve Heller as well as they would a more traditionally patriotic author by allowing him to demonstrate a larger point to the culture.

Jack D. Hunter's novel *The Ace* features several elements of military myth. Overall, the novel is intended to represent the changes wrought in American society by the First World War. The main character, John King, is at first relatively innocent, in the sense that he is not portrayed as being especially worldly or street-smart. He rescues William Carpenter from his crashed airplane, and eventually enlists, later using his connection to Carpenter to be transferred to pilot training. He participates in several battles over the course of the novel and becomes world-weary and cynical. He does not survive the war, dying of his wounds at the end of the novel.[29] The pilot he rescues, William Carpenter, does survive, and in the company of an adventurous woman named Mary Lou Whiting, literally rides off to make his fortune in the inter-war years. A fourth character, Congressman Thaddeus Slater, is portrayed as a man of smoky back-room deals, an opportunistic politician who seeks to become rich from supplying war materiel to the American forces. Many of the standard elements of military myth are present – John King becomes a hero through his aerial exploits, Carpenter serves his country by testing various foreign aircraft, and Mary Lou Whiting (though not military) makes a contribution by funding hospitals in the war zone.

However, the main use of military myth in this novel is to explain to the reader how and why the war changed American culture. We watch as John King becomes tired and bitter, struggling with the demands of the dangerous air war. Mary Lou describes him as having changed: "When

he was a kid he was smart, capable, and easygoing. He pretty much liked everybody and was liked in return, had kindly thoughts about most everybody, was even-tempered, sympathetic, and generally ambitious […] When I last saw him, during a visit to his airdrome, he pretty much described himself as a basket case, a disaster…"[30] This description could be applied to America itself, which having gone through the war, found its culture and society changed. Though America was never attacked directly, and though far fewer Americans were killed than were allied service members, the country was changed. John King's change from happy-go-lucky flying enthusiast to bloodied veteran symbolizes the larger cultural change that took place during and after the war. As a doctor tells us in the novel, "War leaves no one untouched, so you, I— none of us—will ever be the same again. The America we left no longer exists."[31] This is the main point of *The Ace* – to use military myth to demonstrate and explain the changes in the society from which it comes.

Movies are also a common vehicle for the propagation of military myth. One such movie is *Strategic Air Command,* which was released in 1955 and deals with the recall to active service of Lt Col "Dutch" Holland. The movie centers on his actions as a B-36 and B-47 pilot and the difficulties his active duty service cause with his wife. The movie is intended to paint a picture of Dutch Holland and the men of SAC as dedicated to their duty and cognizant of the vital importance of their atomic deterrent. The movie uses relatively straightforward imagery and iconography to tell Holland and SAC's story; there are several expository speeches given by different characters stressing the importance of their jobs and their contribution to national defense. The movie was supported by Strategic Air Command, who saw it as a way to tell their story to the nation. Dutch Holland stands in for the public to a certain extent, as he (and therefore the viewing audience) is shown the equipment and personnel that make up SAC, and

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spoken to about the importance of its mission. The movie ends with Dutch, having been informed that he will be leaving the Air Force, watching through the window with his wife as new B-47 bombers fly past on a training sortie. The message is clear; Dutch has done his duty, and that duty is something of which the American citizen should be proud. The brave and dedicated men and SAC itself are on duty to serve the cause of national defense, and the society they serve is intended to be both aware and proud of that fact.

The 1963 film *A Gathering of Eagles* is broadly similar to Strategic Air Command in the elements of military myth it portrays. In the movie, Rock Hudson is cast as Col Jim Caldwell, who is sent by CINCSAC to take over a wing that has just failed an ORI. At first, his harsh methods alienate many of his key subordinates, including an O-6 maintenance officer who is not happy to be told he needs to stop personally fixing aircraft (!) and delegate work to his subordinates. The Air Base Wing Commander and the Vice Wing Commander are also extremely unhappy with the authoritarian nature of the new commander's edicts. Like *Strategic Air Command*, Col. Caldwell's marriage suffers, as his wife is unenthused about his new, hardened persona and the manner in which he goes about addressing the Wing's problems. At the end of the movie, the ORI team returns; some drama occasions as the Vice Wing Commander is forced to make a hard decision under pressure regarding the launch of a B-52 which is suffering from engine problems. Having made the decision to launch, the wing passes its re-inspection (and the Vice Wing Commander learns an important lesson about when to take risk.) The movie, like *Strategic Air Command*, emphasizes the important role of the modern Air Force in providing a nuclear deterrent against the Soviet Union. Through watching Col. Caldwell address the Wing's problems, members of the society learn that successfully maintaining the nuclear deterrent takes decisive effort and unyielding discipline. Society learns

that men like Col. Caldwell face a difficult task as they labor on behalf of the nation, and is provided a window into the (albeit fictionalized) daily life of the Strategic Air Command. Finally, the society is shown that the men who choose to serve this cause are good men, who have the best interests of the nation at heart. The movie humanizes the members of Strategic Air Command by demonstrating how they act under pressure and why it is important for them to carry out their mission.

Red Tails is another military movie that features strong elements of military myth. It tells the story of a group of Tuskegee Airmen, who go through pilot training and on to service in Italy and then later as bomber escorts over Germany. The movie is intended to demonstrate to the public that the Tuskegee Airmen overcame significant barriers and performed superbly in combat; the institutional racism that threatened several times to end the Tuskegee program and/or deny them real combat opportunities is depicted in depth during the movie. The elements of military myth that are present are similar to those of *Strategic Air Command* – the individual pilots are depicted, as is the entire unit and the Tuskegee Airmen as a concept, as heroes who were able to triumph in the face of adversity and contribute significantly to the war effort. The cause they served is portrayed as admirable and worthy, despite the racism present at the time. They are shown to be trail-blazers, who by the example they set and the skills they possessed, laid the groundwork for greater acceptance of minorities in the Army and later the Air Force. The society is intended to understand the hardships and triumphs of the group, and that their sacrifices were not in vain.

The Tuskegee Airmen have been in the public consciousness, relatively speaking, for some years. In fact, Red Tails was not the first movie to be made about their exploits; *The Tuskegee Airmen* was released in 1995 and tells a similar story of combat first in Italy and later in

Germany. The purpose of both these movies is similar: to bring the heroic struggles of a relatively little-known group to the attention of the greater society. The society is intended to understand that these airmen represented them, sometimes at great personal and professional peril, in the Second World War. The society is intended to appreciate their contributions and the importance of the cause they served. The military myth in both Tuskegee Airmen-related movies is identical: these men made sacrifices on behalf of the nation, and in so doing served two causes: the equality of black Americans and the freedom of mankind.

Overall, military myth plays a vital role in the health of a society. Military myths educate a society about the nature of the men and women who serve in its armed forces, the units in which they serve and the importance to the society of the cause which those individuals serve. The myth will demonstrate to the society that the military members portrayed represent the society itself, and that therefore those members are worthy of societal recognition, respect, and emulation. Examples of these concepts can be seen in history; for example, the memorials erected to commemorate the dead of WWI as well as the nature of the burials of deceased service members. The respect and admiration afforded to WWI Airmen and to members of the Chinese Long March demonstrate the roles these individuals are intended to play for the societies who observe them. The "whitewashing" of German soldiers as simple, apolitical military warriors helped their prestige in their home society, and also made it easier for America to work closely with Cold War-era Germany as an ally against the Soviet Union. Many contemporary novels also contain elements of military myth. The bomber crew and President portrayed in *Red Alert* are shown as heroes, regardless of the inherent deadliness of their tasks. *The Hunters'* Capt Cleve Connell pursues mythic status, eventually according that status to another man. The pilots in *Cassda* teach us that although members come and go, the cause lives on, to be taken up by

other worthy military members in the future. *Catch-22* inverts all the usual elements of military myth to show Heller's conviction that the cause itself is inherently absurd. The Ace uses its portrayal of myth to demonstrate how American society changed due to the events and experiences of WWI. Several contemporary movies also showcase the same elements. *Strategic Air Command* and *A Gathering of Eagles* demonstrate the importance, and at times the loneliness, of unflinching dedication to the nation's defense. *Red Tails* and *The Tuskegee Airmen* show a group of men who overcame major barriers – both in and outside the society – and went on to serve bravely at war. The novels and movies teach the society about the men and women who serve and remind the society that their deeds are noble and important, because they are done to ensure the safety of the society itself. Overall, military mythmaking is vital to a health of a society because it reminds the members of the society that its military members and the cause they serve are worthy of respect. A society which venerates its military members and their cause is more likely to be successful in convincing members of that society to serve in its defense. Through its treatment of military members, military myth justifies why the members of a society should willingly participate in its defense.

Endnotes

[1] Mark A. Snell, "'The Price Was Made and the Price Was Paid': Grandpa's Scar and Other Memories of the AEF," in *Unknown Soldiers: The American Expeditionary Forces in Memory and Remembrance*, ed. Mark A. Snell (Kent, OH: The Kent State University Press, 2008), 20.

[2] *Ibid.*

[3] G. Kurt Piehler, "Remembering the War to End All Wars," in Unknown Soldiers: The American Expeditionary Forces in Memory and Rembrance, ed. Mark A. Snell (Kent, OH: The Kent State University Press, 2008), 33.

[4] *Ibid.*

[5] Dominick A. Pisano, Thomas J. Dietz, Joanne M. Gernstein, and Karl S. Schneide, eds., *Legend, Memory, and the Great War in the Air* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 1992),29.

[6] Harrison E. Salisbury, *The Long March: The Untold Story* (New York, NY: Harper and Row, Inc, 1985), 348.

[7] Daniel Moran, "Introduction: The Legend of the Levée en Masse," in *The People in Arms: Military Myth and National Mobilization since the French Revolution*, eds. Daniel Moran and Arthur Waldon (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 1.

[8] *Ibid.*, 2.

[9] *Ibid.*

[10] Ronald Smelser and Edward J. Davies II, *The Myth of the Eastern Front: The Nazi-Soviet War in American Popular Culture* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 248.

[11] *Ibid.*

[12] *Ibid.*, 249.

[13] *Ibid.*, 250.

[14] Peter Bryant, *Red Alert* (Wildside Press, 1958), 157-158.

[15] *Ibid.*, 143.

[16] *Ibid.*, 183.

[17] *Ibid.*

[18] *Ibid.*, 177.

[19] *Ibid.*, 178-179.

[20] James Salter, *The Hunters* (New York, NY: Vintage International, August 1999), 85.

[21] *Ibid.*, 90.

[22] James Salter, *Cassada* (New York, NY: Counterpoint, 2002), 43.

[23] *Ibid.*, 207.

[24] *Ibid.*, 208.

[25] Joseph Heller, *Catch-22* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster Paperbacks, 2004), 214.

[26] *Ibid.*, 232.

[27] *Ibid.*, 172.

[28] *Ibid.*, 185-186.

[29] Jack D. Hunter, The Ace (Indianapolis, IN: Blue River Press, 2008), 293.

[30] *Ibid.*, 269-270.

[31] *Ibid.*, 271.

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